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A FLORENTINE TRAGEDY



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A



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FROM

Dr. L. Cabot Briggs.....

.....

.....



A FLORENTINE TRAGEDY

**By
OSCAR WILDE**

**OPENING SCENE
BY STURGE MOORE**

**1908
JOHN W. LUCE & COMPANY
BOSTON AND LONDON**

63498.55.500

A

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

WHEN Oscar Wilde was arrested at an Hotel in Sloane Street in April, 1895, he asked me to go to his house, 16 Tite Street, Chelsea, in order to secure his unpublished MSS. These consisted chiefly of "The Duchess of Padua," the enlarged version of "Mr. W. H." and "A Florentine Tragedy." On reaching the house I found that the door of his library had been locked. He subsequently wrote from Holloway Prison and again asked if I had found any of the MSS. Accompanied by another of his friends I obtained access to the room, but was unable to find the missing works. A remarkable feature of the case was that all the published MSS. were lying

about in various fragmentary states, and it was perfectly obvious that someone familiar with the author's writing had been there before us. A few days later an execution was put into the house on a judgment obtained by a creditor, and this was followed by one of the most disgraceful auctions that ever occurred in London. Not many personal friends were present, as all the money they could afford was being devoted to his defence. Private letters and MSS. were dispersed, though I believe the sale of such things under the circumstances was illegal; and private collectors who were anxious to buy any of the pictures, works of art, or literary relics (of which Wilde possessed a certain number) were hustled by the dealers. An eye-witness informs me that he saw a great many small objects being pocketed by the crowd. For many years afterwards the second-hand shops were full of objects from the sale.

Whether any of the three MSS. escaped my notice, and were included in the sale, of course I cannot say. "The Duchess of Padua" I possessed in a transcript, so the loss of the MS. was of no special consequence. I have been told, however, that all three MSS. are now in America, but I have never been able to hear anything definite or satisfactory on the subject. A few years afterwards I was looking over the papers and letters which I had succeeded in rescuing from Tite Street, and came across loose sheets of MS. and typewriting which I had imagined at the time were fragments of "The Duchess of Padua." On putting them together in a coherent form I immediately recognized that they belonged to the lost "Florentine Tragedy," or such portions of it as Wilde ever wrote. I assumed that the opening scene, though once extant, had disappeared. One day, however, I heard from Mr. Willard, the well

known actor, that he possessed a type-written fragment of a play which Wilde had submitted to him, and this he kindly forwarded for my inspection. It agreed in every particular with what I had taken so much trouble to put together. This suggests, conclusively I imagine, that Wilde had never written the opening scene, as Mr. Willard's version began where mine did. It was characteristic of the author to have finished what he never began.

When the Literary Theatre Society produced "Salome" in 1906 they asked me for some other short drama by Wilde to present at the same time, as "Salome" does not take very long to play. I offered them the fragment of "A Florentine Tragedy." By a fortunate coincidence, Mr. Thomas Sturge Moore, the poet and dramatist, happened to be on the committee of this Society, and to him was entrusted by my consent the task of

writing an opening scene to make the play complete. It is not for me to criticise either his work or Wilde's, but I think I am justified in saying that Wilde himself would have envied, with an artist's envy, such lines as:

We will sup with the moon,
Like Persian princes that in Babylon
Sup in the hanging gardens of the King.

In a stylistic sense Mr. Sturge Moore has accomplished a feat in reconstruction, whatever opinions may be held of "A Florentine Tragedy" by Wilde's admirers or detractors. The achievement is particularly remarkable because Mr. Sturge Moore has nothing in common with Wilde other than what is shared by all real poets and dramatists. He is a landed proprietor on Parnassus, not a trespasser. In England we are more familiar with the poachers. Time and Death are of course necessary before

there can come any adequate recognition of one of our most original and gifted singers. But I may mention among his works "The Vinedresser and Other Poems" (1899), "Absalom" — A Chronicle Play (1903), "The Centaur's Booty" (1903). Mr. Sturge Moore is also an art critic of distinction, and his learned works on "Durer" (1905) and "Correggio" (1906) are more widely known (I am sorry to say) than his powerful and enthralling poems.

ROBERT ROSS.

A FLORENTINE TRAGEDY

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

GUIDO BARDI	.	.	.	.	.	<i>A Florentine prince</i>
SIMONE	.	.	.	.	.	<i>A merchant</i>
BIANCA	.	.	.	.	.	<i>His wife</i>
MARIA	.	.	.	.	.	<i>A tire-woman</i>

The action takes place at Florence.

A FLORENTINE TRAGEDY

The scene represents a tapestried upper room giving on to a balcony or loggia in an old house at Florence. A table laid for a frugal meal, a spinning-wheel, distaff, etc., chests, chairs and stools.

*As the Curtain Rises Enter Bianca,
with her Servant, Maria.*

M A R I A

Certain and sure, the sprig is Guido
Bardo,
A lovely lord, a lord whose blood is blue !

B I A N C A

But where did he receive you ?

M A R I A

Where, but there
In yonder palace, in a painted hall! —
Painted with naked women on the walls,—
Would make a common man or blush or
smile
But he seemed not to heed them, being a
lord.

B I A N C A

But how know you 'tis not a chamber-
layne,
A lackey merely?

M A R I A

Why, how know I there is a God in
heaven?
Because the angels have a master surely.
So to this lord they bowed, all others
bowed,
And swept the marble flags, doffing their
caps,

With the gay plumes. Because he stiffly
said,
And seemed to see me as those folk are
seen
That will be never seen again by you,
“ Woman, your mistress then returns
this purse
Of forty thousand crowns, is it fifty
thousand ?
Come name the sum will buy me grace of
her.”

B I A N C A

What, were there forty thousand crowns
therein ?

M A R I A

I know it was all gold ; heavy with gold.

B I A N C A

It must be he, none else could give so
much.

M A R I A

'Tis he, 'tis my lord Guido, Guido Bardi.

B I A N C A

What said you?

M A R I A

I, I said my mistress never
Looked at the gold, never opened the
purse,
Never counted a coin. But asked again
What she had asked before, "How young
you looked?
How handsome your lordship looked?
What doublet
Your majesty had on? What chains,
what hose
Upon your revered legs?" And curtseyed
I,

B I A N C A

What said he?

M A R I A

Curtseyed I, and he replied,
“ Has she a lover then beside that old
Soured husband or is it him she loves,
my God !
Is it him ? ”

B I A N C A

Well ?

M A R I A

Curtseyed I low and said
“ Not him, my lord, nor you, nor no man
else.
Thou art rich, my lord, and honoured,
my lord, and she
Though not so rich is honoured . . . ”

B I A N C A

Fool, you fool,
I never bid you say a word of that.

M A R I A

Nor did I say a word of that : you said,

I said, " She loves him not, my lord, nor
loves
Any man else. Yet she might like to
love,
If she were loved by one who pleased her
well;
For she is weary of spinning long alone.
She is not rich and yet she is not poor;
but young
She is, my lord, and you are young.
(*Pauses smiling.*)

B I A N C A

Quick, quick!

M A R I A

There, there! 'Twas but to show you
how I smiled
Saying the lord was young. It took him
too;
For he said, " This will do! If I should
call
To-night to pay respect unto your lovely—

Our lovely mistress, tell her that I said,
Our lovely mistress, shall I be received ? ”
And I said, “ Yes.” “ Then say I come
and if

All else is well let her throw down some
favour,

When as I pass below.” He should be
there !

Look from the balcony ; he should be
there ! —

And there he is, dost see ?

B I A N C A

Some favour. Yes.

This ribbon weighted by this brooch will
do.

Maria, be you busy near within, but, till
I call take care you enter not. Go down
And let the young lord in, for hark, he
knocks.

(Exit Maria.)

Great ladies might he choose from and
yet he

Is drawn . . . ah, there my fear is!
Was he drawn

By love to me — by love's young strength
alone?

That's where it is, if I were sure he
loved,

I then might do what greater dames have
done

And venge me on a husband blind to
beauty.

But if! Ah if! he is a wandering bee,
Mere gallant taster, who befools poor
flowers . . .

*(Maria opens the door for Guido Bardi,
and then withdraws.)*

My lord, I learn that we have something
here,

In this poor house, which thou dost wish
to buy.

My husband is from home, but my poor
fate

Has made me perfect in the price of
velvets,
Of silks and gay brocades. I think you
offered
Some forty thousand crowns, or fifty
thousand,
For something we have here? And it
must be
That wonder of the loom, which my
Simone
Has lately home; it is a Lucca damask,
The web is silver over-wrought with roses.
Since you did offer fifty thousand crowns
It must be that. Pray wait for I will
fetch it.

GUIDO

Nay, nay, thou gracious wonder of a
loom
More cunning far than those of Lucca, I
Had in my thought no damask silver
cloth
By hunch-back weavers woven toilsomely.

If such are priced at fifty thousand crowns
It shames me, for I hoped to buy a fabric
For which a hundred thousand then were
little.

B I A N C A

A hundred thousand was it that you said ?
Nay, poor Simone for so great a sum
Would sell you everything the house
contains.

The thought of such a sum doth daze the
brains
Of merchant folk who live such lives as
ours.

G U I D O

Would he sell everything this house
contains ?
And everyone, would he sell everyone ?

B I A N C A

Oh, everything and everyone, my lord.
Unless it were himself ; he values not

A woman as a velvet, or a wife
At half the price of silver-threaded woof.

GUIDO

Then I would strike a bargain with him
straight.

BIANCA

He is from home; may be will sleep
from home;
But I, my lord, can show you all we
have;
Can measure ells and sum their price,
my lord.

GUIDO

It is thyself, Bianca, I would buy.

BIANCA

O, then, my lord, it must be with Simone
You strike your bargain; for to sell
myself
Would be to do what I most truly loathe.

Good-night, my lord; it is with deep
 regret
I find myself unable to oblige
Your lordship.

GUIDO

Nay, I pray thee let me stay
And pardon me the sorry part I played,
As though I were a chapman and intent
To lower prices, cheapen honest wares.

BIANCA

My lord, there is no reason you should
 stay.

GUIDO

Thou art my reason, peerless, perfect,
 thou,
The reason I am here and my life's goal,
For I was born to love the fairest
 things . . .

BIANCA

To buy the fairest things that can be
 bought.

GUIDO

Cruel Bianca! Cover me with scorn,
I answer born to love thy priceless self,
That never to a market could be brought,
No more than winged souls that sail and
soar
Among the planets or about the moon.

BIANCA

It is so much thy habit to buy love,
Or that which is for sale and labelled
love,
Hardly couldst thou conceive of priceless
love.
But though my love has never been for
sale
I have been in a market bought and
sold.

GUIDO

This is some riddle which thy sweet wit
reads
To baffle mine and mock me yet again.

B I A N C A

My marriage, sir, I speak of marriage
now,
That common market where my husband
went
And prides himself he made a bargain
then.

G U I D O

The wretched chapman, how I hate his
soul.

B I A N C A

He was a better bidder than thyself,
And knew with whom to deal . . . he
did not speak
Of gold to me, but in my father's ear
He made it clink: to me he spoke of love.
Honest and free and open without price,

G U I D O

O white Bianca, lovely as the moon,
The light of thy pure soul and shining
wit

Shows me my shame, and makes the
thing I was
Slink like a shadow from the thing I am.

B I A N C A

Let that which casts the shadow act, my
lord,
And waste no thought on what its shadow
does
Or has done. Are youth, and strength,
and love
Balked by mere shadows, so that they
forget
Themselves so far they cannot be recalled ?

G U I D O

Nobility is here, not in the court.
There are the tinsel stars, here is the
moon,
Whose tranquil splendour makes a day
of night.
I have been starved by ladies, specks of
light,

And glory drowns me now I see the
moon.

B I A N C A

I have refused round sums of solid gold
And shall not be by tinsel phrases bought.

G U I D O

Dispute no more, witty, divine Bianca;
Dispute no more. See I have brought
my lute!

Close lock the door. We will sup with
the moon

Like Persian princes, that, in Babylon
Sup in the hanging gardens of the king.
I know an air that can suspend the soul
As high in heaven as those towered-
gardens hang.

B I A N C A

My husband may return, we are not
safe.

GUIDO

Didst thou not say that he would sleep
from home?

BIANCA

He was not sure, he said it might be so.
He was not sure — and he would send
my aunt
To sleep with me, if he did so decide,
And she has not yet come.

GUIDO (*Starting*)

Hark, what's that?
(*They listen, the sound of Maria's voice
in anger with some one is faintly heard.*)

BIANCA

It is Maria scolds some gossip crone.

GUIDO

I thought the other voice had been a
man's.

B I A N C A

All still again, old crones are often gruff.
You should be gone, my lord.

G U I D O

O, sweet Bianca !
How can I leave thee now ! Thy beauty
 made
Two captives of my eyes, and they were
 mad
To feast them on thy form, but now thy
 wit,
The liberated perfume of a bud,
Which while a bud seemed perfect, but
 now is
That which can make its former self
 forgot :
How can I leave the flower who loved the
 leaf ?
Till now I was the richest prince in
 Florence,
I am a lover now would shun its throngs,
And put away all state and seek retreat

At Bellosguardo or Fiesole,
Where roses in their fin'st profusion hide
Some marble villa whose cool walls have
 rung
A laughing echo to Decameron,
And where thy laughter shall as gaily
 sound.
Say thou canst love or with a silent kiss
Instil that balmy knowledge on my soul.

B I A N C A

Canst tell me what love is?

G U I D O

 It is consent.
The union of two minds, two souls, two
 hearts,
In all they think and hope, and feel.

B I A N C A

Such lovers might as well be dumb, for
 those

Who think and hope and feel alike can
 never
Have anything for one another's ear.

GUIDO

Love is? Love is the meeting of two
 worlds
In never ending change and counter
 change.

BIANCA

Thus will my husband praise the mercer's
 mart,
Where the two worlds of East and West
 exchange.

GUIDO

Come. Love is love, a kiss a close
 embrace.
It is . . .

BIANCA

My husband calls that love
When he hath slammed his weekly ledger
 to.

GUIDO

I find my wit no better match for thine
Than thou art match for an old crabbed
man;
But I am sure my youth and strength
and blood
Keep better tune with beauty gay, and
bright,
As thine is, than lean age and miser toil.

BIANCA

Well said, well said, I think he would not
dare
To face thee, more than owls dare face
the sun;
He's the bent shadow such a form as thine
Might cast upon a dung heap by the
road,
Though should it fall upon a proper floor
'Twould be at once a better man than
he.

GUIDO

Your merchant living in the dread of loss

Becomes perforce a coward, eats his heart.
Dull souls they are, who, like caged
 prisoners, watch
And envy others joy; they taste no food
But what its cost is present to their
 thought.

B I A N C A

I am my father's daughter, in his eyes
A home-bred girl who has been taught to
 spin.
He never seems to think I have a face
Which makes you gallants turn where'er
 I pass.

G U I D O

Thy night is darker than I dreamed,
 bright Star.

B I A N C A

He waits, stands by, and mutters to
 himself,
And never enters with a frank address
To any company. His eyes meet mine

And with a shudder I am sure he counts
The cost of what I wear.

GUIDO

Forget him quite.
Come, come, escape from out this dismal
life,
As a bright butterfly breaks spider's web,
And nest with me among those rosy
bowers,
Where we will love, as though the lives
we led
Till yesterday were ghoulish dreams dis-
persed
By the great dawn of limpid joyous life.

BIANCA

Will I not come?

GUIDO

O, make no question, come.
They waste their time who ponder o'er
bad dreams.

We will away to hills, red roses clothe,
And though the persons who did haunt
that dream

Live on, they shall by distance dwindled,
seem

No bigger than the smallest ear of corn,
That cowers at the passing of a bird,
And silent shall they seem, out of ear-
shot,

Those voices that could jar, while we
gaze back

From rosy caves upon the hill-brow open,
And ask ourselves if what we see is not
A picture merely, — if dusty, dingy lives
Continue there to choke themselves with
malice.

Wilt thou not come, Bianca? Wilt thou
not?

(A sound on the stair.)

G U I D O

What's that?

*(The door opens, they separate guiltily,
and the husband enters.)*

S I M O N E

My good wife, you come slowly, were it
not better

To run to meet your lord? Here, take
my cloak.

Take this pack first. 'Tis heavy. I have
sold nothing:

Save a furred robe unto the Cardinal's
son,

Who hopes to wear it when his father
dies,

And hopes that will be soon.

But who is this?

Why, you have here some friend. Some
kinsman doubtless,

Newly returned from foreign lands and
fallen

Upon a house without a host to greet him.

I crave your pardon, kinsman. For a
house

Lacking a host is but an empty thing
And void of honour; a cup without its
 wine,
A scabbard without steel to keep it
 straight,
A flowerless garden widowed of the sun.
Again I crave your pardon, my sweet
 cousin.

BIANCA

This is no kinsman and no cousin neither.

SIMONE

No kinsman, and no cousin! You amaze
 me.
Who is it then who with such courtly
 grace
Deigns to accept our hospitalities?

GUIDO

My name is Guido Bardi.

S I M O N E

What! The son
Of that great Lord of Florence whose dim
towers
Like shadows silvered by the wandering
moon
I see from out my casement every night!
Sir Guido Bardi, you are welcome here,
Twice welcome. But I trust my honest
wife
Hath not with foolish chatterings wearied
you,
As is the wont of women.

G U I D O

Your gracious lady,
Whose beauty is a lamp that pales the
stars
And robs Diana's quiver of her beams,
Has welcomed me with such sweet
courtesies
That if it be her pleasure, and your own,
I will come often to your simple house.

And when your business bids you walk
abroad

I will sit here and charm her loneliness
Lest she might sorrow for you overmuch.
What say you, good Simone?

S I M O N E

My noble lord,
You bring me such high honour that my
tongue
Like a slave's tongue is tied, and cannot
say
The word it would. Yet not to give you
thanks
Were to be too unmannerly. So, I thank
you,
From my heart's core.

It is such things as these
That knit a state together, when a Prince
So nobly born and of such fair address,
Forgetting unjust Fortune's differences,
Comes to an honest burgher's honest home
As a most honest friend.

And yet, my lord,
I fear I am too bold. Some other night
We trust that you will come here as a
friend,
To-night you come to buy my merchandise.
Is it not so? Silks, velvets, what you will,
I doubt not but I have some dainty wares
Will woo your fancy. True, the hour is
late,
But we poor merchants toil both night
and day
To make our scanty gains. The tolls are
high,
And every city levies its own toll,
And prentices are unskilful, and wives
even
Lack sense and cunning, though Bianca
here
Has brought me a rich customer to-night.
Is it not so, Bianca? But I waste time.
Where is my pack? Where is my pack,
I say?

Open it, my good wife. Unloose the cords.
Kneel down upon the floor. You are
better so.

Nay, not that one, the other. Despatch,
despatch.

Buyers will grow impatient oftentimes.
We dare not keep them waiting. Ay!
'tis that,

Give it to me; with care. It is most
costly.

Touch it with care. And now, my noble
lord,

GUIDO

Nay, I protest; trouble yourselves no
farther,

There is no urgency in my desire
To choose among your silken fabrics. —

Nay,
Another time, another day will do.

SIMONE

Nay, pardon — I have here a Lucca
damask,

The very web of silver, and the roses
So cunningly wrought that they lack
perfume merely

To cheat the wanton sense. Touch it,
my lord.

Is it not soft as water, strong as steel?
And then the roses! Are they not finely
woven?

I think the hillsides that best love the
rose,

At Bellosguardo or at Fiesole,
Throw no such blossoms on the lap of
Spring.

Or if they do their blossoms droop and
die.

Such is the fate of all the dainty things
That dance in wind or water. Nature
herself

Makes war on her own loveliness and
slays

Her children like Medea. Nay, but, my
lord,

Look closer still. Why, in this damask
here

It is summer always, and no winter's
tooth
Will ever blight these blossoms. For every
ell
I paid a piece of gold. Red gold, and
good,
The fruit of careful thrift.

G U I D O

Honest Simone,
Enough, I pray you. I am well content.
To-morrow I will send my servant to you,
Who will pay twice your price.

S I M O N E

My generous Prince!
I kiss your hands. And now I do re-
member
Another treasure hidden in my house
Which you must see. It is a robe of
state,
Woven by a Venetian, the stuff, cut-
velvet;

The pattern, pomegranates: each separate seed

Wrought of a pearl; the collar all of pearls,

As thick as moths in summer streets at night,

And whiter than the moons that madmen see

Through prison bars at morning. A male ruby

Burns like a lighted coal within the clasp.

The Holy Father has not such a stone,

Nor could the Indies show a brother to it.

The brooch itself is of most curious art.

Cellini never made a fairer thing

To please the great Lorenzo. You must wear it.

There is none worthier in our city here.

And it will suit you well. Upon one side

A slim and horned satyr leaps in gold

To catch some nymph of silver. Upon the other

Stands Silence with a crystal in her hand,

No bigger than the smallest ear of corn,
That wavers at the passing of a bird;
And yet so cunningly wrought that one
would say

It breathed, or held its breath.

Worthy Bianca,
Would not this noble and most costly robe
Suit young Lord Guido well?

Nay, but entreat him;
He will refuse you nothing, though the
price

Be as a prince's ransom. And your profit
Shall not be less than mine.

B I A N C A

Am I your prentice?
Why should I chaffer for your velvet robe?

G U I D O

Nay, fair Bianca, I will buy the robe.
And all things that the honest merchant
has

I will buy also. Princes must be ransomed,
And fortunate are all high lords who fall
Into the white hands of so fair a foe.

S I M O N E

I stand rebuked. But you will buy my
wares?

Will you not buy them? Fifty thousand
crowns

Would scarce repay me. But you, my
lord, shall have them

For forty thousand. Is that price too
high?

Name your own price. I have a curious
fancy

To see you in this wonder of the loom
Amidst the noble ladies of the court,
A flower among flowers.

They say, my lord,
These highborn dames do so affect your
Grace

That where you go they throng like flies
around you,
Each seeking for your favour.

I have heard also
Of husbands that wear horns, and wear
them bravely,
As being of the fashion of the time,
A fashion most fantastical.

G U I D O

Simone,
Your reckless tongue needs curbing; and
besides,
You do forget this gracious lady here
Whose delicate ears are surely not attuned
To such coarse music.

S I M O N E

True: I had forgotten,
Nor will offend again. Yet, my sweet
Lord,
You'll buy the robe of state. Will you
not buy it?

But forty thousand crowns. 'Tis but a
trifle,
To one who is Giovanni Bardi's heir.

G U I D O

Settle this thing to-morrow with my
steward,
Antonio Costa. He will come to you.
And you shall have a hundred thousand
crowns
If that will serve your purpose.

S I M O N E

A hundred thousand!
Said you a hundred thousand? Oh! be
sure
That will for all time, and in everything
Make me your debtor. Ay! from this
time forth
My house, with everything my house
contains,
Is yours, and only yours.
A hundred thousand!

My brain is dazed. I will be richer far
Than all the other merchants. I will buy
Vineyards, and lands, and gardens. Every
loom

From Milan down to Sicily shall be mine,
And mine the pearls that the Arabian
seas

Store in their silent caverns.

Generous Prince,
This night shall prove the herald of my
love,
Which is so great that whatso'er you ask
It will not be denied you.

G U I D O

What if I asked
For white Bianca here?

S I M O N E

You jest, my Lord,
She is not worthy of so great a Prince.
She is but made to keep the house and
spin.

Is it not so, good wife ? It is so. Look !
Your distaff waits for you. Sit down and
spin.

Women should not be idle in their homes.
For idle fingers make a thoughtless heart.
Sit down, I say.

B I A N C A

What shall I spin ?

S I M O N E

Oh ! spin
Some robe which, dyed in purple, sorrow
might wear
For her own comforting : or some long-
fringed cloth
In which a new-born and unwelcome babe
Might wail unheeded ; or a dainty sheet
Which, delicately perfumed with sweet
herbs,
Might serve to wrap a dead man. Spin
what you will,
I care not, I.

B I A N C A

The brittle thread is broken,
The dull wheel wearies of its ceaseless
round,
The duller distaff sickens of its load;
I will not spin to-night.

S I M O N E

It matters not.
To-morrow you shall spin, and every
day
Shall find you at your distaff. So Lucretia
Was found by Tarquin. So, perchance,
Lucretia
Waited for Tarquin. Who knows? I
have heard
Strange things about men's wives. And
now, my Lord,
What news abroad? I heard to-day at
Pisa
That certain of the English merchants
there
Would sell their woollens at a lower rate

Than the just laws allow, and have
entreated

The Signory to hear them.

Is this well?

Should merchant be to merchant as a
wolf?

And should the stranger living in our
land

Seek by enforced privilege or craft

To rob us of our profits?

G U I D O

What should I do

In such a matter? Tell me. Shall I
go

And wrangle with the Signory on your
count?

And wear the gown in which you buy from
fools?

Or sell to sillier bidders? Honest Simone,
Wool-selling or wool-gathering is for
you,

My wits have other quarries.

B I A N C A

Noble Lord,
I pray you pardon my good husband
here,
His soul stands ever in the market-place,
And his heart beats but at the price of
wool.
Yet he is honest in his common way.
(*To Simone*)
And you, have you no shame? A gracious
Prince
Comes to our house, and you must weary
him
With most misplaced assurance. Ask
his pardon.

S I M O N E

I ask it humbly. We will talk to-night
Of other things. I hear the Holy Father
Has sent a letter to the King of France
Bidding him cross that shield of snow, the
Alps,
And make a peace in Italy, which will be

Worse than a war of brothers, and more
bloody
Than civil rapine or intestine feuds.

G U I D O

Oh ! we are weary of that King of France,
Who never comes, but ever talks of
coming.
What are these things to me ? There are
other things
Closer and of more import, good Simone.

B I A N C A (*to Simone*)

I think you tire our most gracious guest.
What is the King of France to us ? As
much
As are your English merchants with their
wool.

S I M O N E

Is it so then ? Is all this mighty world
Narrowed into the confines of this room
With but three souls for poor inhabitants ?

Ay! there are times when the great
universe,

Like cloth in some unskilful dyer's vat,
Shrivels into a handsbreadth, and per-
chance

That time is now? Well! let that time
be now,

Let this mean room be as that mighty
stage

Whereon kings die, and our ignoble lives
Become the stakes God plays for.

I do not know

Why I speak thus. My ride has wearied
me,

And my horse stumbled thrice, which is
an omen

That bodes not good to any.

Alas! my lord,

How poor a bargain is this life of man,
And in how mean a market are we
sold!

When we are born our mothers weep, but
when

We die there is none weep for us. No,
not one.

(Passes to back of stage.)

B I A N C A

How like a common chapman does he
speak!

I hate him, soul and body. Cowardice
Has set her pale seal on his brow. His
hands,

Whiter than poplar leaves in windy
springs,

Shake with some palsy; and his stammer-
ing mouth

Blurts out a foolish froth of empty words
Like water from a conduit.

G U I D O

Sweet Bianca,
He is not worthy of your thought or mine.
The man is but a very honest knave
Full of fine phrases for life's merchan-
dise,

Selling most dear what he must hold most
cheap,
A windy brawler in a world of words.
I never met so eloquent a fool.

B I A N C A

Oh would that Death might take him
where he stands.

S I M O N E (*turning round*)

Who spake of Death? Let no one speak
of Death.

What should Death do in such a merry
house,

With but a wife, a husband, and a friend
To give it greeting? Let Death go to
houses

Where there are vile adulterous things,
chaste wives

Who growing weary of their noble lords
Draw back the curtains of their marriage
beds,

And in polluted and dishonoured sheets

Feed some unlawful lust. Ay! 'tis so
Strange, and yet so. *You* do not know
the world.

You are too single and too honourable.
I know it well. And would it were not so,
But wisdom comes with winters. My
hair grows grey,
And youth has left my body. Enough of
that.

To-night is ripe for pleasure, and indeed,
I would be merry, as beseems a host
Who finds a gracious and unlooked for
guest
Waiting to greet him.

But what is this, my lord?
Why, you have brought a lute to play to us.
Oh! play, sweet Prince. And, if I am
too bold,
Pardon, but play.

G U I D O

I will not play to-night.
Some other night, Simone.

(*To Bianca*) You and I
Together, with no listeners but the stars,
Or the more jealous moon.

SIMONE

Nay, but, my lord !
Nay, but I do beseech you. For I have
heard
That by the simple fingering of a string,
Or delicate breath breathed along hol-
lowed reeds,
Or blown into cold mouths of cunning
bronze,
Those who are curious in this art can
draw
Poor souls from prison houses. I have
heard also
How such strange magic lurks within
these shells
That at their bidding casements open
wide,
And Innocence puts vine leaves in her
hair,

And wantons like a maenad. Let that
pass.

Your lute, I know, is chaste. And there-
fore play :

Ravish my ears with some sweet melody.
My soul is in a prison house, and needs
Music to cure its madness. Good Bianca,
Entreat our guest to play.

B I A N C A

Be not afraid.
Our well loved guest will choose his place
and moment ;
That moment is not now. You weary him
With your uncouth insistence.

G U I D O

Honest Simone,
Some other night. To-night I am content
With the low music of Bianca's voice,
Who, when she speaks, charms the too
amorous air,

His cycle round her beauty.

SIMONE

She has her virtues as most women have.
But beauty is a gem she may not wear.
It is better so, perchance.

If you will not draw melodies from your
lute
To charm my moody and o'er troubled
soul,
You'll drink with me at least?

(Sees table.) Your place is laid.
Fetch me a stool, Bianca. Close the
shutters.

Set the great bar across. I would not
have
The curious world with its small prying
eyes
To peer upon our pleasure.

Now, my lord,
Give us a toast from a full brimming cup.

(He pours out two glasses of wine, the bottle visibly shaking in his hand and when Guido lifts his glass a stain is left on the cloth by the wet foot of the glass; seeing which Simone starts back and sets down his own glass without tasting it.)

What is this stain upon the cloth ? It looks
As purple as a wound upon Christ's side.
Wine merely is it ? I have heard it said
When wine is spilt blood is spilt also,
But that's a foolish tale.

My lord, I trust
My grape is to your liking ? The wine of
 Naples
Is fiery like its mountains. Our Tuscan
 vineyards
Yield a more wholesome juice.

G U I D O

I like it well,

Honest Simone; and, with your good
leave,
Will toast the fair Bianca when her lips
Have like red rose-leaves floated on this
cup
And left its vintage sweeter. Taste,
Bianca.

(Bianca drinks.)

Oh! all the honey of Hyblean bees,
Matched with this draught were bitter!
Good Simone,
You do not share the feast.

SIMONE

It is strange, my lord,
I cannot eat or drink with you, to-night.
Some humour, or some fever in my blood,
At other seasons temperate, or some
thought
That like an adder creeps from point to
point,
That like a madman crawls from cell to
cell,

Poisons my palate and makes appetite
A loathing not a longing. (*Goes aside.*)

G U I D O

Sweet Bianca,
This common chapman wearies us with
words.

I must go hence. To-morrow I will come.
Tell me the hour.

B I A N C A

Come with the youngest dawn!
Until I see you all my life is vain.

G U I D O

Ah! loose the falling midnight of your
hair,
And in those stars, your eyes, let me behold
Mine image, as in mirrors. Dear Bianca,
Though it be but a shadow, keep me
there,
Nor gaze at anything that does not show

Some symbol of my semblance. I am
jealous
Of what your vision feasts on.

B I A N C A

Oh! be sure
Your image will be with me always.
Dear,
Love can translate the very meanest thing
Into a sign of sweet remembrances.
But come before the lark with its shrill
song
Has waked a world of dreamers. I will
stand
Upon the balcony there.

G U I D O

And by a ladder
Wrought out of scarlet silk and sewn with
pearls
Will come to meet me.
White foot after foot,
Like snow upon a rose tree.

B I A N C A

As you will.
You know that I am yours for love or
death.

G U I D O

Simone, I must go to mine house.

S I M O N E

So soon? Why should you? the great
Duomo's bell
Has not yet tolled its midnight, and the
watchmen
Who with their hollow horns mock the
pale moon
Lie drowsy in their towers. Stay a while.
I fear we may not see you here again,
And that fear saddens my too simple
heart.

G U I D O

Be not afraid, Simone. I will stand
Most constant in my friendship. But
to-night

I go to mine own home, and that at once.
To-morrow, sweet Bianca.

SIMONE

Well, well, so be it.
I would have wished for fuller converse
with you,
My new found friend, my honourable
guest,
But that it seems may not be.

And besides
I do not doubt your father waits for you,
Wearying for voice or footstep. You, I
think,
Are his one child? He has no other
child.

You are the gracious pillar of his house,
The flower of a garden full of weeds.
Your father's nephews do not love him
well.

So run folks' tongues in Florence. I
meant but that;
Men say they envy your inheritance

And look upon your vineyard with fierce
eyes

As Ahab looked on Naboth's goodly field.
But that is but the chatter of a town
Where women talk too much.

Good night, my lord.
Fetch a pine torch, Bianca. The old
staircase

Is full of pitfalls, and the churlish moon
Grows, like a miser, niggard of her
beams,

And hides her face behind a muslin mask
As harlots do when they go forth to snare
Some wretched soul in sin. Now, I will
get

Your cloak and sword. Nay, pardon, my
good lord.

It is but meet that I should wait on you
Who hast so honoured my poor burgher's
house,

Drunk of my wine, and broken bread,
and made

Yourself a sweet familiar. Oftentimes

My wife and I will talk of this fair night
And its great issues.

Why, what a sword is this !
Ferrara's temper, pliant as a snake,
And deadlier, I doubt not. With such
steel

One need fear nothing in the moil of life.
I never touched so delicate a blade.
I have a sword too, somewhat rusted
now.

We men of peace are taught humility,
And to bear many burdens on our backs,
And not to murmur at an unjust world,
And to endure unjust indignities.
We are taught that, and like the patient
Jew

Find profit in our pain.

Yet I remember
How once upon the road to Padua
A robber sought to take my pack horse
from me,

I slit his throat and left him. I can bear
Dishonour, public insult, many shames,

Shrill scorn, and open contumely, but he
Who filches from me something that is
mine,

Ay! though it be the meanest trencher-
plate

From which I feed mine appetite — oh!
he

Perils his soul and body in the theft
And dies for his small sin. From what
strange clay

We men are moulded!

GUIDO

Why do you speak like this?

SIMONE

I wonder, my Lord Guido, if my sword
Is better tempered than this steel of yours.
Shall we make trial? Or is my state too
low

For you to cross your rapier against mine,
In jest, or earnest?

GUIDO

Naught would please me better,
Than to stand fronting you with naked
blade
In jest or earnest. Give me mine own
sword.
Fetch yours. To-night will settle the
great issue
Whether the Prince's or the Merchant's
steel
Is better tempered. Was not that your
word?
Fetch your own sword. Why do you
tarry, Sir?

SIMONE

My lord, of all the gracious courtesies
That you have showered on my barren
house
This is the highest.
Bianca, fetch my sword.
Thrust back that stool and table. We
must have

An open circle for our match at arms.
And good Bianca here shall hold the torch
Lest what is but a jest grow serious.

B I A N C A (*to Guido*)

Oh ! kill him, kill him !

S I M O N E

Hold the torch, Bianca.

(*They begin to fight.*)

S I M O N E

Have at you ! Ah ! Ha ! would you ?

(*He is wounded by Guido.*)

A scratch, no more. The torch was in
mine eyes.

Do not look sad, Bianca. It is nothing.
Your husband bleeds, 'tis nothing. Take
a cloth,

Bind it about mine arm. Nay, not so
tight.

More softly, my good wife. And be not
sad

I pray you be not sad. No: take it off.
What matter if I bleed?

(Tears bandage off.)

Again! Again!

(Simone disarms Guido.)

My gentle lord, you see that I was right.
My sword is better tempered, finer steel,
But let us match our daggers.

B I A N C A *(to Guido)*

Kill him! kill him!

S I M O N E

Put out the torch, Bianca.

(Bianca puts out torch.)

Now, my good lord,
Now to the death of one, or both of us,
Or all the three it may be.

(They fight.)

There and there.

Ah! devil, do I hold thee in my gripe!

*(Simone overpowers Guido and throws
him down on the floor.)*

G U I D O

Fool! take your strangling fingers from
my throat.

I am my father's only son; the State
Has but one heir, and that false enemy
France

Waits for the ending of my father's line
To fall upon our city.

S I M O N E

Hush! your father
When he is childless will be happier.
As for the State, I think our state of
Florence

Needs no adulterous pilot at its helm.
Your life would soil its lilies.

G U I D O

Take off your hands.
Take off your damnéd hands. Loose me,
I say.

S I M O N E

Nay, you are caught in such a cunning vice

That nothing will avail you, and your life
Narrowed into a single point of shame
Ends with that shame and ends most
shamefully.

GUIDO

Oh! let me have a priest before I die!

SIMONE

What would'st thou have a priest for?
tell thy sins
To God whom thou shalt see this very
night
And then no more for ever. Tell your
sins
To Him who is most just, being pitiless,
Most pitiful being just. As for my-
self . . .

GUIDO

Oh! help me, sweet Bianca! help me,
Bianca,
Thou knowest I am innocent of harm.

SIMONE

What! is there life yet in those lying
lips?

Die like a dog with lolling tongue! Die!

Die!

And the dumb river shall receive your
corse

And wash it all unheeded to the sea.

GUIDO

Lord Christ receive my wretched soul
to-night.

SIMONE

Amen to that. Now for the other.

*(He dies. Simone rises and looks at
Bianca. She comes towards him
as one dazed with wonder and with
outstretched arms.)*

BIANCA

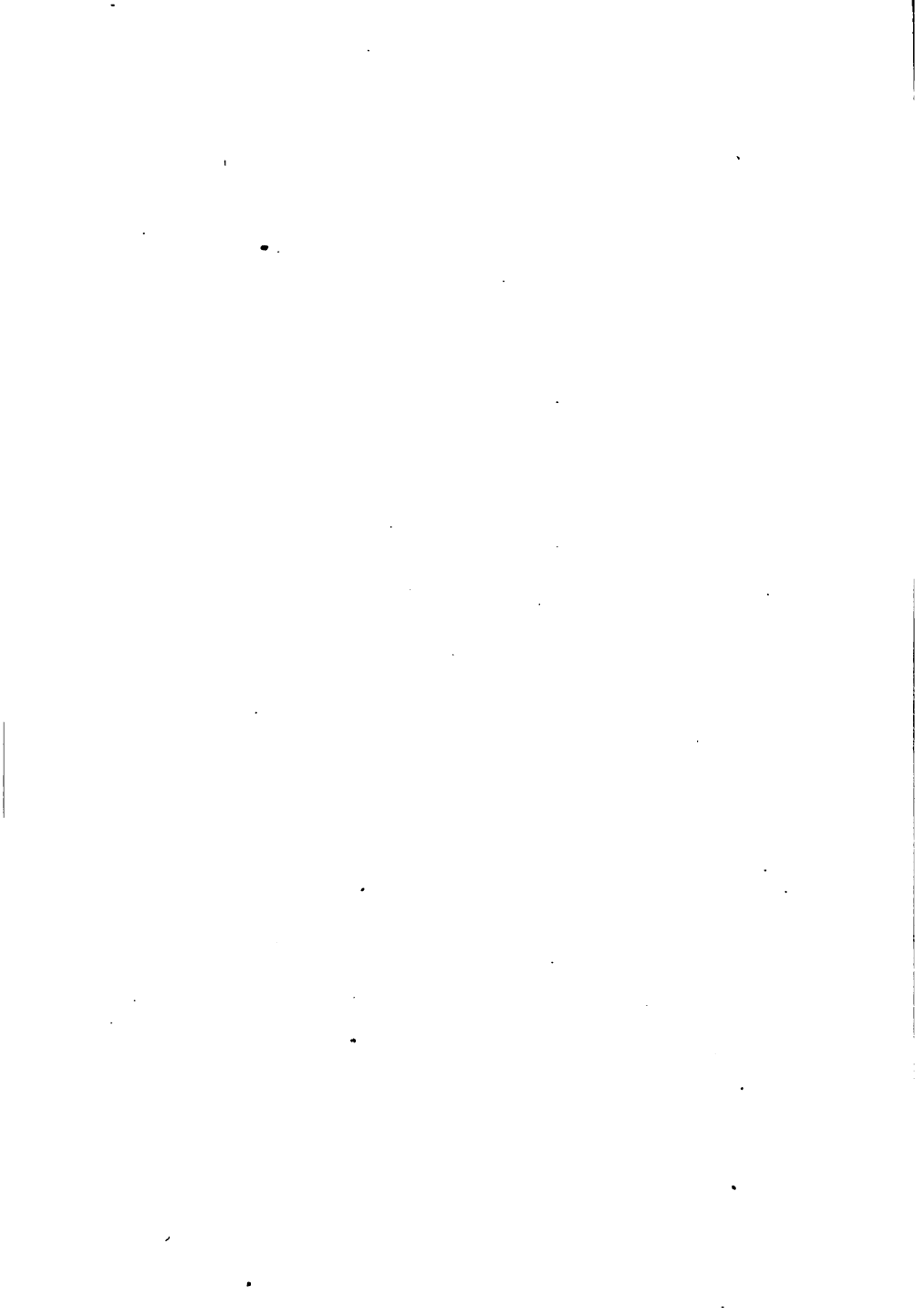
Why

Did you not tell me you were so strong?

SIMONE

Why
Did you not tell me you were beautiful?
(He kisses her on the mouth.)

CURTAIN





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